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The Strange and Terrible Visions of Wilhelm Friess: The Paths of Prophecy in Reformation Europe by Jonathan Green

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The prophecies of the allegedly "famous and highly learned" scholar Vilhelm de Vriese seem to have first appeared in Antwerp during the 1550s, amidst the tumultuous years of the Wars of Religion (p. 17). A few years later, a similar prophecy circulated in Nuremberg from a certain Master Wilhelm Friess, who had recently died. Another appeared during the Dutch Revolt of the 1560s, followed by another in Strasbourg in 1574, and then another in Basel in 1577, all purporting to be new prophecies from the newly-deceased Wilhelm Friess. In each case, the prophecies foretold impending years of calamity, calls for repentance and moral rectitude, and a final epoch heralded by the coming of a great emperor. Decade after decade, the Vriese/Friess texts persisted, with each edition featuring subtle but important changes that spoke to very different groups. Making sense of the long and winding publication history of these enormously popular prophecies is the principal task for historian Jonathan Green, who painstakingly traces them across Europe and uncovers along the way the secrets to both their surprising longevity and their stunning variability in the chaotic epoch of the European Reformations.

Green's work on the Friess prophecies stems from research he completed for his first book, *Printing and Prophecy: Prognostication and Media Change, 1450-1550.* As he observed in this earlier work, short astrological pamphlets were among the most common artifacts of the early printing press. They were short and cheap, and they merged longstanding notions of the supernatural and eschatological with an emerging emphasis on rationalism. In this case, the observation of heavenly bodies, which would ultimately open the door for the Scientific Revolution, also carried the rich symbolic lexicon of medieval astrology into the Early Modern era. Such texts, however, were not without controversy, as they sometimes collided with the struggle among Catholics and Protestants to assert ecclesiastical and political authority within fractured European communities. Indeed, Green opens his study of Friess by recounting the sad tale of two Antwerp publishers who were executed for publishing forbidden works, which included the prophecies of Vilhelm de Vriess. From these tragic stories, we learn that astrological prophecies were important means of disseminating Protestant propaganda in the Catholic Habsburg lands. This meant that even if de Vriess/Friess had been a real person, his name was more important as "a pseudonym that was identified with a particular kind of political and religious agitation" (p. 28). At the same time, the Friess name could not always offer protection, and dreadful consequences awaited those publishers whose texts were identified by the authorities.

As the textual lineage of Friess shows, the messages embedded within astrological prophecies were not the same across texts, nor were they the same across time. In the chapters that follow, Green traces the publishing history of the pamphlets, identifying multiple threads with labels like Friess I and Friess II, and charting their respective trajectories from Antwerp and on to Lübeck, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Basel, and Erfurt. For readers unfamiliar with the deep textual readings inherent in the work of historians of the Early Modern era, keeping track of the different iterations can be maddening. However, few will fail to miss the author's main point about the ways in which the prophecy served different contexts with relatively minor alterations. In southern Germany, for example, the prophecy became less cataclysmic after the famed Peace of Augsburg of 1555, when the outcome of the religious wars tilted towards compromise, and

when Lutheran communities strove to preserve friendly relations with the Habsburgs. As Green explains, "The imperial prophecies that had been appropriated for subversive ends in Antwerp were reappropriated to sell imperial hegemony in Nuremberg" (p. 64). In later editions, the emphasis shifted to differences between Lutherans and Calvinists, and the prophecy spoke to a beleaguered Calvinist community in Antwerp during the early days of the Dutch Revolt and to a second in Strasbourg during the 1570s. Here Green notes not only changes in content, but also sharp contrasts in tone. "Reformed apocalypticism in the later sixteenth century," he observes, "usually lacked the Lutheran sense of pessimism and expectation of decline, instead displaying, in most cases, a characteristic militant optimism and expectation of gradual improvement" (p. 114).

Scholars of the period will no doubt learn a great deal from this study, which reaches across national and linguistic boundaries and ties together numerous editions of the Friess prophecy heretofore studied in isolation. In the appendix, Green reprints two of Friess' prophecies, which experts will find useful as they dissect Green's arguments, even as non-specialists may wish that Green had provided some translations. At the same time, some will likely accuse Green of overreaching in places, as when he attempts to identify the author of the Friess II text as the sixteenth-century publicist Johann Fischart. Though he makes an intriguing case for aligning Friess and Fischart, Green is forced to rest his case on meager circumstantial evidence, claiming that the language in the text was a close match for Fischart's contemporary views. It is thus likely that the mystery of authorship for some editions will continue, though Green may have fanned the flames of debate.

Non-specialists can benefit from Green's study as well, although the brevity of the book leaves the author little space to tell more completely the story of contemporary prophecy, meaning that readers will have to turn to Green's earlier book or to one of the works cited in the bibliography for a more comprehensive view. Nonetheless, Green draws some important broad conclusions, and it is difficult to disagree with his foundational premise: "How a culture imagines its future reveals as much about it as how it memorializes its past" (p. 1). He ends the book with some insightful notes about the "textuality of prophecy," pointing out that the astrological pamphlet, though short, was nonetheless widely successful as a "sophisticated verbal work of art" (p. 121). Here readers learn something new about how content from earlier editions crept into later ones, not only through direct borrowing, but also through a "prophetic grammar" that facilitated messages tailored for specific contexts (p. 122). In this way, readers come to appreciate why prophecy remained so appealing on the eve of the Age of Enlightenment, and will no doubt join Green in seeing the Friess texts as an important example of both the limits of printing and its power to subvert authority and transform Early Modern Europe.

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